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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001512

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA: WHAT IS HARIRI COOKING UP?

REF: BEIRUT 1511

BEIRUT 00001512 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea believes accepting Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun's offers of detente is the best way to coopt Aoun's presidential ambitions. He dismissed concerns that March 14's support could boomerang by increasing prospects for Aoun's candidacy, arguing that most people see through his devilish ways. Geagea was more concerned, however, with what he perceives as recent changes in Saad Hariri's position. The Future Movement leader appeared to be straying from March 14's unified support for either Nassib Lahoud or Boutros Harb, instead advocating a consensus candidate -- probably MP Robert Ghanem -- a change of heart Geagea felt must be due to some sort of new Saudi regional plan. Geagea expressed deep concern about what he saw as Ghanem's weakness and inappropriateness for the presidency. End summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and his advisor, Elie Khoury, at Geagea's home in Marab on September 29. Geagea was in a good mood, although it became quickly apparent that there was something on his mind.

AOUN'S CHARM OFFENSIVE

3. (C) Geagea explained Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader General Michel Aoun's recent about-face (reftel) as an effort to win new allies after his first strategy, wearing his opponents down by force and threats of chaos, failed. Moral in Aoun's circle is down, he said. Recognizing the writing on the wall, i.e., that Amal, Hizballah, and perhaps even Syria are looking for a consensus candidate for the presidency, Aoun realizes that to salvage any chance he has of becoming that candidate, he has to mend fences with March 14. He is therefore opening up "tous azimuts" -- or in all directions. Aoun will only accept a candidate other than himself if he realizes he has no hope and March 8 is unwilling to go the route of chaos (i.e., a vacuum or two government scenario).

14. (C) The Ambassador noted that one positive side to Aoun's overtures is that it would help March 14 challenge Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's self-proclaimed role as sole kingmaker and conductor of all of the ongoing dialogues between parties, knocking him off balance. Though if Aoun's popularity increases in the process, this could be a problem.

15. (C) Geagea dismissed the Ambassador's last concern, noting that building bridges had never been Aoun's forte; on the contrary, his constantly shifting alliances only revealed that he is willing to negotiate with the devil to achieve his personal ambitions. Geagea agreed, however, that over half of Lebanese Forces Christians would (despite decades of antipathy) like to see a reconciliation with the FPM as a way to build Christian strength and solidarity.

16. (C) The Ambassador asked whether Aoun's cancellation of planned meetings with Progressive Socialist Party leader (PSP) Walid Jumblatt (scheduled for October 1) and Saad Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury on September 28 (Aoun sent his own advisor and son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, to the meeting instead) suggested, as Hariri and Jumblatt believe, that Aoun had gone too far and Hizballah was reining him in. Geagea disagreed with this theory, noting that one of his envoys was meeting with Aoun at that very moment.

17. (C) Geagea, pondering for a moment with his chin resting in his hand, stated, "this is bizarre." Why did Aoun see UN Envoy for Lebanon Geir Pederson three times this week? he asked aloud. The Ambassador responded that, according to Pederson, Aoun was "in love" with March 14. It's the only way we can change him, Geagea countered, otherwise he will "float again." As he had always told Saad Hariri, getting Aoun's agreement on a consensus candidate would be a good thing for March 14.

BEIRUT 00001512 002.2 OF 003

18. (C) Geagea admitted, however, that despite the flirtation with Aoun, he remained firmly behind March 14 candidates Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb. The majority position was the election must take place without outside interference to elect one of these two candidates or nothing, Geagea said, adding that he had told this to two of Berri's representatives, MPs Ali Bazzi and Michel Moussa, the day before.

HARIRI'S ARMAGEDDON

19. (C) Suddenly switching gears, Geagea then asked, "Where are the Saudis in this game?" The Ambassador, stressing successful USG efforts to bring the new French government in line with U.S. policies, agreed that to look into the Saudi positions next. "Something is going on," Geagea said, adding that he had sensed from his September 27 meeting with the Future Movement leader that Saad was cooking up a compromise with Berri. Before Saad met with Berri, he, too, was insisting on a March 14 candidate, even if that meant electing one by absolute majority. Now he's saying the contrary, warning how, though he would abide by it, an absolute majority vote will split the country, including the army, and he would not agree to be prime minister. It's an "Armageddon," Geagea proclaimed.

110. (C) The Ambassador noted that Hariri had made similar remarks in their September 28 meeting (septel), saying March 14 had to appear to be ready to go all the way; in the end, however, the cost would be too high, and it would have to think about alternatives. Berri's "alternatives," Saad had said, were Michel Khoury, Charles Rizk, and Robert Ghanem. We must find out what is going on and stop it, Geagea responded.

111. (C) Asked whether Hariri realized that the worst scenario

for March 14 would be a split within its ranks, Geagea said yes. March 14 leaders had agreed to continue at this stage to insist on the right to an absolute majority vote to elect either Nassib Lahoud or Boutros Harb, and would confirm this in their meeting on September 30. Hariri's Future Movement will go along, with the acknowledgment that the price will be high. But now Hariri is saying he won't be prime minister if it comes to this. There's something behind this, Geagea repeated, we must find out what is going on.

¶12. (C) Answering his own question, Geagea dismissed the hypothesis that Hariri wanted to become prime minister so badly he was willing to negotiate on the presidency. Rather, he believed outside forces were responsible for his sudden eagerness to compromise. Geagea first suspected France (since, as Geagea believes, Robert Ghanem is a personal friend of President Sarkozy's) but now he believed Saudi Arabia was pulling the strings, possible as part of a Saudi-Iranian deal, whereby the Iranians would take care of Syria and Saudi Arabia would deal with France and the U.S., to avoid a mess in Lebanon.

WORRIES ABOUT ROBERT GHANEM

¶13. (C) Moving to a one-on-one conversation with the Ambassador while pacing in his driveway, Geagea said that the real problem is that both Hariri (who genuinely wants Nassib Lahoud) and Syria (who hopes for LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as president) have zeroed in on Robert Ghanem as their fall-back choice. Both Hariri and Syria want a weak president, easily manipulated, and they will end up sharing Ghanem between them, Geagea said. Ghanem has no significant Christian support, meaning that independent Christians will once again feel cheated out of an office that is their right. This sense of alienation will drive them back into the arms of Michel Aoun, and the resurgent Aoun will humiliate and marginalize March 14 Christians, who will have gained nothing from their alliance with Hariri. Geagea admitted that his outreach to Aoun was in part designed to create a unified Christian veto against Ghanem.

¶14. (C) Geagea said that, in the next March 14 leadership meeting, he would try to persuade Hariri that supporting Ghanem was a big mistake for the Sunnis, too. The Sunnis are

BEIRUT 00001512 003.2 OF 003

concerned about a heavily armed, growing Shia population in Lebanon. The Sunnis should thus be forging a partnership with the Christians, to stand together against Hizballah and its arms. But if Ghanem becomes president and a large number of Christians defect to Aoun, then Hariri and the Sunnis will be practically alone, standing against a united Shia-Christian front. Hariri needs a partner, not a servant, Geagea said, musing again about whether the Saudis are pushing Hariri into such a compromise.

SOLICITING A WASHINGTON INVITATION

¶15. (C) Geagea also noted with concern the high-profile visits of Lebanese Muslims -- Hariri and Jumblatt -- to Washington and the lack of any credible Christian visitors. In order to show Lebanon's Christians that the March 14 movement benefits them, too, Geagea argued that he needed to be received in Washington. He would wait until after presidential elections, given the heavy Lebanese traffic to Washington now. But it is time for him to go, he said.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) The traditionally right-wing Geagea and the traditionally left-wing Jumblatt -- both of whom are now hard-line anti-Syrians -- share a concern about the traditionally centrist Saad Hariri: that Hariri will

ultimately sell them out, in a compromise that is good for Hariri but not, in their view, good for Lebanon. That Geagea would reach out to his arch-rival Aoun, against whom he battled during the civil war, demonstrates the level of concern he has that Hariri seeks a servant rather than strong, independent Christian as president.

¶17. (C) As reported septel, Hariri did not come across in his last meeting with us as someone about to throw his support to Ghanem, whose name was mentioned as only one of three possible fall-back consensus candidates. But Hariri was worried that the cost of going all the way with March 14 presidential candidates would have grave consequences for Lebanon, perhaps a subtle hint to us that Geagea is right to suspect Ghanem is Hariri's private choice. For Hariri's upcoming meetings in Washington, we suggest that we emphasize to him the need to keep in close touch with his March 14 allies, as a split in the March 14 alliance would be an immediate victory for Syria's Lebanese allies.

FELTMAN